

The Experience of Fort Massac

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Alluring – what better way to describe the oldest state park in Illinois? This park has all the makings for a fun and interesting visit, with a replica of Fort Massac, a museum, and 1,450 acres of land to discover. This state park's history dates from before the United States even existed. In fact, the first time the fort's location had ever been used, it was not even fifty years after Columbus discovered America. This park holds the secrets of the battles for land, life, and the ability to say, "We win."

From 1539 to 1541, Hernando De Soto traveled across America in search of gold, silver, and jewels. According to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, in 1540 he and his crew set up a small fortification to protect themselves from the natives.

According to their Web site, the Indians themselves "took advantage of its strategic location overlooking the Ohio River," as well as many other groups of people, including French, British, and American. The reason this spot is so special is because it overlooks the Ohio River. This means that one group cannot be completely surrounded by another; not only that, controlling Fort Massac means controlling the trade on the Ohio River, the peak of Europe's interest.

In 1756, Charles Philippe Aubry was ordered to erect a fort on the Ohio River. His commanding officer, Major de Makarty, had learned of a British plan to attack the French troops for control of the Ohio Valley. Completed June 20, 1757, the location got its first name: Fort De L'Ascension, meaning Fort of the Rise. This fort not only helped prevent the British attack, but also a Cherokee attack shortly after it was built. However,

this fort was not meant to last long. In Clarence W. Alvord's *Illinois Country*, he wrote: "The French had determined to burn the fort and abandon the upper Ohio valley." Thus, in November 1758, the French followed through, and the British took control of the valley, "although for several years its possession was disputed by the Indians," Alvord wrote. In 1759, some Shawnee, assisting in protecting Fort De L'Ascension, retreated to Fort de Chartres for fear that the French would try to retake the fort. While the British were preparing to take over all of the Illinois territory, Makarty found out, and ordered General Villiers to reconstruct the fort, and rename it Fort Massiac, "in honor of the Marquis de Massiac, Minister of Marine," according to Brevet's *Illinois Historical Markers and Sites*. In 1763, the French lost the fort to the British under the Treaty of Paris after the Seven Years' War. Not wanting to give up their special spot, the French burned the fort to the ground, and when Captain Thomas Stirling came to take claim of the land found a burned ruin.

Until 1794, Fort Massac, remained unbuilt. By this time, America had become a nation, and George Washington was president. He ordered General Anthony Wayne to rebuild it. On October 20, 1803, it was completed, and for the next twenty years the fort was used to protect American troops. On November 11, 1803, Lewis and Clark stayed at Fort Massac on their expedition through the Louisiana Territory. In the summer of 1805 Aaron Burr met with General James Wilkinson to make plan for conquering the Southwest. In 1811, the fort was nearly destroyed by the New Madrid earthquake. Rebuilt a year later to assist with the War of 1812, it was deserted again in 1814, and by 1828 hardly anything remained of the original construction because people had taken pieces out of it. It was not for many years that the fort would see any respect.

That year was 1903. The Daughters of the American Revolution purchased the site including 24 acres around it. By November 5, 1908, it was officially Illinois' first state park. In 1939 it was decided to rebuild Fort Massac, but this remained uncompleted for many years as a result of World War II. In the early 1970s, the 1794 American version of the fort stood as a representation of the layers of time. This lasted until the fall of 2002 when it was torn down to make room for the 1802 version of Fort Massac. Completed in 2003, the park is now a place for all kinds of family activities, including picnicking, camping, hiking, and boating.

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources also calls Fort Massac State Park a "complete . . . family vacation spot." However, there is much more to this park; it is the fervent reminder of the foundation of history that cannot be changed. This reminder becomes reality for its visitors every October, during the Fort Massac Encampment. "This re-creation of the lifestyles and atmosphere of the late 1700's attracts more than 80,000 people," claims the Department of Natural Resources. Thus, people visiting during this event can be reminded: though times have changed, and things are different, one thing that remains at the end of the day is history, and that is one thing America can count on. [From Clarence W. Alvord, *Illinois Country, 1673-1818, Brevet's Illinois Historical Markers and Sites*; Department of Natural Resources, "Fort Massac," <dnr.state.il.us/land/landmgt/PARKS/Rf/frmindex.thm>. (Oct. 15, 2006); National Park Service, "Lewis and Clark Expedition: Fort Massac Site," <www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/lewisandclark/mas.htm>. (Oct. 15, 2006); and QuincyNet.com, "Fort Massac State Park," <www.quincynet.com/illinoisparcs/FortMassac.htm>. (Oct. 15, 2006).]